

There's a middle ground, you know

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Valorization Addendum

The current chapter provides more detailed information about how the work presented in this thesis contributed to societal value. First, the practical relevance of the lessons learned is described. Second, a focus is set on different target groups within the community for whom these lessons learned are of interest. Third, a more practical set of activities, tools, and working methods used within this dissertation is focused on. Finally, the dissemination of the key lessons learned into science and practice is described.

Relevance

An intergenerational poverty pattern, where children from poor households do not seem to escape from poverty later in life, became visible in society (Evans, 2016; Tiemeijer, 2016; Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Growing up and living in poverty has negative effects on general well-being and participation (Attree, 2006; Cosgrove, 2007; Gibson et al., 2018; Lucas et al., 2008). About 8% of the Dutch families have a low income (Statistics Netherlands, 2018). Some specific regions in the Netherlands, score worse on well-being, participation and poverty outcomes. Especially the Southern part of the Netherlands is characterized for its worse outcomes compared to the mean of the Netherlands (Jansen & Meesters, 2018). Although strengthening the position of low-SES families is seen as important, recruiting and retaining them within demarcated interventions to enhance their well-being, has been found difficult (Carlson et al., 2006; Van den Berg-Slagter, 2006). Since low-SES families are expected to benefit most from approaches aimed at enhancing their situation, further research to involve and work with these families are explored. In order to stimulate low-SES families to participate, the current thesis focused on a community engagement approach. The studies presented in this thesis indicate a learning process for both professionals working with the families as for the low-SES families themselves. This thesis described studies towards creating equal partnership to bring together the best of professional expertise and local talents. Activities were carried out providing information and suggestions to enhance partnership processes with low-SES families in the future. Several studies in this thesis showed the need to 'start doing', letting go of professional work routines and bending towards the talents of the families. Besides, a strong social and community network and changes in higher level educational and employability structures are recommended to strengthen the situation low-SES families. Overall, an optimal navigation between top-down professional support and bottom-up local initiatives is needed to constantly adapt towards a middle ground.

Target groups

Multiple target populations may benefit from the lessons learned in this thesis. First, the approach Vaals Meets originated from the subsidy of Fonds NutsOhra (FNO), the call 'Een Gezonde Toekomst Dichterbij'. It was focused at enhancing the situation of low-SES families, making the results in this thesis informative to FNO. The integrative focus of the community approach strengthened support structures surrounding the families. Together with the partnership process, where activities were carried out together with the families, enhancements in their personal situation arose. The focus on defining key lessons learned on all social ecological levels provided FNO with some clear recommendations for future subsidy trajectories.

Second, policy makers on a national and local level may benefit from the findings in this dissertation. Several studies indicated the need for changes in all social ecological levels.

To create a system change that is beneficial to the situation of low-SES families, the community approach had to be supported by local governance. The outspoken support of policy makers was found especially important to the low-SES families, who were a bit suspicious towards this partner at the beginning. A collaborative attitude from the government as a partner was therefore seen as crucial to enhance community participation. Furthermore, in this dissertation more upstream determinants of health were valued in enhancing the situation of low-SES families. National and local governments have a large influence in enhancing preconditions for these determinants, for example education and employment.

Third, for professionals who work in the field supporting low-SES families this dissertation may be beneficial. All studies in this dissertation heavily relied on the support of a broker to recruit and support low-SES citizens. Besides, the large network of the activation broker was helpful in gaining support for formal and informal partners. In this dissertation, the added value of a brokerage role was studied. Opportunity, capability and motivation were found important determinants explaining the behavior of the broker to gain insight in the successes achieved. With the compilation of the Activation Broker Wheel, future ‘brokers’ may be enabled to enhance their support for low-SES families. Indicating that a broker can be successful when pragmatically and decisively acting upon some behaviors, such as creating a personal connection, mapping key circumstances, recognizing and utilizing opportunities, tailoring the support, while utilizing their network with the cooperation of close partners.

Finally, other partners working with low-SES groups may find the learnings of this dissertation useful to their own practice. Low-SES groups are often supported by different professionals for example social work practices, credit banks, mental and physical health care organizations. But also at schools, sport clubs, recreational associations, and housing corporations this group is present. One thing we learned is that all services need to work together as a ‘well-oiled machine’ to timely provide the support needed. Having a broker in place who acquired the formation and utilization of a network with all partners and served as a main point of contact seemed beneficial to keep the ‘machine oiled’. With this dissertation, it was aimed to provide formal and informal partners with more information about how to support low-SES families, who their partners may be, and why it is important to focus on what motivates these families.

Activities, tools and working methods

The Vaals Meets approach was found unique in designing research activities. The organic process was found successful in supporting low-SES families, by acting upon local opportunities. Eventually leading to the discovery of some activities and tools that worked well when creating a community engagement process. An overarching working method was the navigation between bottom-up approaches, focusing at the local talents in the community, and the top-down approaches, when professional expertise was leading. When the optimal middle ground was found between some steering and letting go, partnerships flourished leading to some impressive activities.

Before the actual community approach could be set in place, two tools were particularly useful in gaining insight into the current state of the community. These important tools were helpful in designing activities together with families and partners. First, photovoice was seen as a useful tool in supporting low-SES families and their children to discuss and define the most important needs of their community. By making use of pictures, participants were

enabled to tell their stories. These needs were used during the whole community approach, making these of crucial value. Second, social network analysis was carried out to define the strength of the support network surrounding low-SES families. By visualising this network and showing it to local partners, more information about network connections and opportunities to strengthen the network arose compared to solely interviewing professionals regarding their support networks. A more in-depth insight in the support networks was seen necessary to create optimal opportunities for low-SES families.

During the community approach, support from professionals in the form of a broker was an important 'tool' to start partnering with low-SES families. The activation broker had this role, but also the Sport Mix Club coach could be viewed as a broker. Having brokers in place that were a trusted and familiar face in the community were supportive in recruitment and retention of low-SES families. Families were easier engaged in the community engagement activities when a broker was present.

Finally, activities were carried out on all levels of de Social Model of Health to create an optimal environment for the families and their children to develop themselves. Small scale activities were useful to start building upon more resilience and independence among the families. However, the fulfilment of a physical place, the Trading Shop, seemed to add the most to the development of both low-SES families and the network of formal and informal partners. The Trading Shop became a connecting pillar for the Municipality Vaals. Low-SES families were supported by the activities of volunteers and professionals in the Trading Shop, just like other vulnerable citizens of the Municipality. The Trading Shop therefore seemed to fulfil in the inclusivity and accessibility that was needed.

"I started in the Trading Shop to get back in society and start meeting people. I did not do that at first. It all sounds good now, but my life was a mess. I got help from the broker to make my life more stable. Now I get the opportunity to grow in the Trading Shop. I can make myself useful again for society." (Volunteer Trading Shop)

Dissemination of lessons learned

The learnings of the studies presented in this thesis have been disseminated through multiple channels. First, the seven scientific articles were written and submitted/ published to international, open access journals to share lessons learned with a scientific audience. Journals were selected based on their scope and target audience to ensure that our messages reached professionals with closer links to the actual workfield.

Second, the outcomes of the work presented in this thesis was transformed into factsheets and reports containing policy advices for municipality and related organizations, such as Social Services. The close connection between the researcher and policy maker ensured that lessons learned from the Vaals Meets approach could be translated into executive policies.

Third, the 10th IUHPE European Conference and International Forum for Health Promotion Research was visited and an oral presentation was provided to share findings of the Vaals Meets approach. Besides, the practical implications and lessons learned have been presented to different partners employed in the health and social domains by means of presentations throughout the Netherlands. For example, via several symposia of the Dutch Public Health Services on a national scale and more local during the referral meetings of the Academic Collaborative Center for Public Health. Projectmembers also took part in sessions

focusing on knowledge transfer about successful initiatives, such as the theme sessions of poverty and health of PHAROS and Platform31.

Fourth, successes of the local activities in Vaals, especially the Trading Shop, were well-received by local newspapers, radio and TV. Several news items were published about goals, activities and achievements of the Trading Shop for local citizens, such as creating a meeting place, contributing to sustainability by trading and supporting citizens in enhancing their participation in society. Overall, the Trading Shop was well received and promoted by local and regional press.

Fifth, lessons learned were used for educational purposes. For FNO a Dutch workshop containing of one day with up to four days with add-on modules was created about community engagement for professional participating with low-SES groups. For the World Health Organization, a community engagement workshop was also designed based upon the lessons learned in Vaals Meets. This workshop has a more international character containing valuable community engagement approaches worldwide. Various lectures were also developed for both university and college students providing more insight into community engagement and the take home messages learned from Vaals Meets.

Finally, it is worth to mention that the activities carried out during the project period are maintained to date. The Trading Shop received a subsidy from the municipality for at least five more years with the aim to form a sustained initiative for decades to come. Besides, the model used in municipality Vaals to get access to healthcare was changed based on the insights gained during Vaals Meets. The working method of the activation broker was taken as a starting point to make support to citizens more efficient, while maintaining the personal attention needed.